The Right to Clean Water in First Nations: The Photovoice Project

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation

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Photovoice is an approach used to empower community members to work together to identify, represent and enhance their community.

- It equips individuals with cameras so they can create photographic evidence and symbolic representations to help others see the world through their eyes.
- Groups can share their stories and have their voices heard through both pictures and dialogues.
The following photos and words come from adult students at the ATEC Centre in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation.

The students were asked to take photos that depicted how they saw their community’s current water and sewage system.

They then wrote short captions to help describe those pictures.

The following represents their voice on the issue.
As in most northern reserves, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation has fresh water surrounding it, but that doesn’t mean it is easy to find a clean glass of it to drink.
Hydro development across Northern Manitoba has had major effects on the water quality in the river and lakes. One result of dams, such as this one, is that our resource areas have been flooded.

We’ve experienced erosion and exposure to increases in mercury, which is washed into the water. In many situations, it has made the water unsafe to drink without treatment.
The shorelines of the lakes and rivers around Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation have been dramatically affected by fluctuating water levels due to hydro development. This has forced the community to spend a tremendous amount of money on water treatment.

You can see the levels of silt and decaying trees that have left the water dirty, contaminated and unsafe to drink … but one day these defects will no longer be in play.
There are differences between federal and provincial legislation and responsibilities around safe drinking water. This can result in side by side communities having very different levels of water treatment, as is the case here.

The Metis community, being under provincial jurisdiction is seen by many to have a higher quality of water treatment.
This is a picture of outside of the Water Treatment Complex. Though this complex has served the community well for a number of years, it is currently way too small for the demand being placed on it. This increases the risk of breakdowns and other water issues. In addition, its current size is holding back the needed construction of new houses and a school in the community.
This is a picture of inside the Nelson House water treatment plant. We use these tanks to generate water to every house that has running water. There is high silt content in our water but we know how to treat the water and make it potable.
In the water treatment plant we use chemicals to treat the water so it could be drinkable. The equipment, though old, does a good job of cleaning the water and making it safe to drink. The problem is that the system, being too small for the current population and demand, has to work way over capacity. This can lead to breaks and shut downs.
The water treatment plant needs many repairs and upgrades. It may be better to build a whole new plant than spend money repairing this one.
The bay is by Gilbert McDonald Arena here in Nelson House. Just above the bay there is a water filling station located on the left side. From this view there is a culvert that drains into this bay. The drainage is from the ditches along the side of the roads that drains rain and snow. Going on for several years there has been a few too many water breaks that flowed into this drainage.
Water trucks provide water to the local houses that don’t have water lines connected to their homes. There are three different areas Micelle Point, Dog Point and R.C. Point where the houses have water and sewage tanks. During the winter season some or many of the pipes tend to freeze up when the weather is 30-40 below. And that is when our neighbours tend to come get water and use the shower/bath, laundry, cooking etc... The trucks run on a schedule during the week and on weekends for emergency purposes. It is great that we have water trucks. Why you might ask. With only having one fire truck we could have water when the fire hydrants are not operational.
This is a glimpse of what the water filling station looks like on the inside. The workers fill the water trucks here and deliver it to about 50% of the community members that are dependent on water tanks and sewage tank systems. The other 50% have piped water to their homes.
Of those community members that are dependent on water tank system, half are elders and children. They use this water on a daily basis for bathing, drinking, cleaning and for cooking. As you can see there is discolouration on the fill line and it looks unsanitary. So far it is unknown if this water fill station and the water trucks even get an annual cleaning, which should be recommended.
What I think about the pipe is that it is not put in the ground properly. There should at least be sand covering it and protecting it from possible freezing or damage. Nelson House also needs bigger water pipes for the people of the community.
Soil erosion in the community has caused much damage to the current water system. This adds to further risk of damage, personal injury and breakdown. Much needs to be done to get our system up to proper standards.
The picture is from a home we have in the community. Before this home was put here the previous home burnt down. The exposed pipe shown is a water pipe that is supposed to be underground to prevent the pipe from freezing during the winter season. The new residents of this home will now experience frozen pipes every winter season.
The Otetiskiwin Kiskinwamahtowekamil (O.K.) School and Nisichawayasihk Neyo Collegiate (N.N.O.C.) School were closed the week of September 8th-12, 2014. Around 900 students and teachers were affected due to plumbing problems underneath the building and could not attend class for a week. The plumber from Winnipeg said it was only a temporary fix because we don’t have the right pipes. Will this keep happening to the students? Expectations are that it will, on a larger scale.
This is a photo of a building across from the Atoskiwin Training & Employment Centre of Excellence (ATEC) in Nelson House. You can see a pipe sticking out of the building leading to nowhere. For some reason there is always water running out of it in the summer. Can you see the hole in the ground where the water has landed and runs down forming a ditch? This flow has also damaged the foundation of the building and there is a power box nearby that increases the risk of injury. The O.K. School is also just down the road.
This is a picture of the entrance to a water tank shack. As you can see, there are some openings in the left corner where rain water and snow can get in. These holding tanks can become a huge problem. The inside of the tank needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, which is expensive and the Band often does not have enough money to do this. The tanks freeze over the winter and cause clogged and cracked pipes. When summer arrives the frozen tanks melt and flood the basements that cause mold. This is an unhealthy environment to live in.
In the last photo you saw the inside, now here is the outside view of the water tank shack where it was built to connect to the house. It shifted over the past couple of years and we had to put insulation in the cracks to try and keep the cold out.
This is the water pipe leading into the house. You can see that we had to find a way to keep the pipe from freezing in the winter. We wrapped it in cotton, foil, rope – whatever we could find at the time. It helps, but when it’s really cold outside it still freezes over night and we have to detach the pipe and bring it in to thaw out. After it thaws and the ice is out, we then take it out to reattach it, which isn’t easy. There is a heater in the shack attached to the wall, but it doesn’t help much either. The plumbers would usually come to thaw the pipes out with a torch but they couldn’t come thaw them out every day (because that’s how often it would happen last year) so we had to find our own way of resolving this issue.
Here is the pump that sucks the water from the tank. You can see that there has been some damage to the wall from trying to pull the pipe out, trying to put it back in, sometimes the pump would have to be repaired and once had to be replaced because when the pipes would freeze over-night the pump would still be running but with nothing going through. When that happens everyone is usually asleep. This pump is in a closet of one of the rooms and sometimes it would leak from taking it out and putting it back so there is a little damage to the floor.
In the picture you can see a drainage pipe that has been broken, temporarily repaired with tape and plastic, but still leaking.

Notice that there is neither OSB on the side walls of the crawl space nor plastic on the ground with sand on top. Without these, there is a high risk of mold forming which can lead to serious health concerns.
Due to issues of freezing and bursting pipes, water often accumulates in the crawl spaces of homes. You can see the moisture buildup everywhere in this picture.
Leaking taps increase the demand for water. If many of the houses in the community have such issues, this condition increases the demand on an already overtaxed water treatment plant and the sewage lagoon.
Leaky pipes have the same effect as leaky taps. In addition, it increases the amount of moisture and risk of mold in our homes.
This picture shows the damage that can result from leaky or frozen pipes. If not repaired, it increases the risk of sickness from mold build up.
With the many water breaks and issues of freezing pipes, some community members have resorted to storing water in large containers like this one in their homes. We used this water barrel all through the last winter season because our pipes froze. We are on the main line of the water system.
Bottled Water is not always the best to drink because when you leave bottled water in your vehicle, the heat cause a chemical to be released from the plastic bottle into the water which can be hazardous to your health. It is also very expensive to purchase and transport to the community. Anyway, how can we be sure the water in the bottle you purchased is any cleaner or safer than your tap water?

Boiling your water is the best way to ensure it is suitable to drink. Filtering devices and chemical purification products are not as effective. Boiling your water kills all kinds of micro-organisms such as bacteria, parasites and viruses.
This picture is showing the sewage tank right outside the doorway of this house. Vehicles drive right by on the road with the pipes sticking out of the ground coming from the house.
This is the lagoon at Mitchell’s Point. It is where waste and sewage from every home and organization in the community is disposed. There are three cells to the system.
This picture is of the lagoon’s closet cell (Cell 3) and is made up of all sewage. The white raft-looking things are floating pumps. The lagoon has a filtering system that flows to Cell 2 than flows through to Cell 1. This system of cells makes the “water” almost clean enough to consume. Before freeze up and the winter months, Cell 1 is to be drained. In the past there was a mistake once where the sewage and waste water in Cell 3 was drained instead of Cell 1 and made its way into our lake where we draw our drinking water from.
The sewage trucks dump raw sewage into Cell 3 of the lagoon. What was once a swamp now looks nothing like a swamp. The community really needs a sewage treatment plant for the people of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation.
Water is just a tap away for some people. For other families it is not so easy to access clean water and sometimes you have to go get it yourself.

The most importantly thing is we need safe drinking water for the children - giving our children a healthy future with clean water.
Recommendations

1. **Build a new treatment plant.** The current one is old and working at over capacity.

2. **Ensure qualified water treatment operators.** There is a need for northern training, regulation and licencing. ATEC could play a role in this for northern communities.

3. **Extend piped water to entire reserve.**

4. **Reduce the risk of contaminations** due to excess handling and storage of drinking water. This includes more cleaning/flushing of tanks on a regular schedule.
5. Reduce incidents of pipes freezing in winter. This includes well trained public works people able to fix ongoing problems and the better insulation of tanks.

6. Community education on what should (and should not) go in the toilet and sink. The purpose is to reduce contaminants and non-degradable material ending up in the sewage lagoon.

7. Build a new garbage dump. The current one is too close to the lake, placing our source of water at risk.